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AUTHOR Freed, Barbara F.
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ABSTRACT

Language skill attrition refers to the loss of any language or portion of a language whether it be the declining use of mother tongue skills, the replacement of one language by another in language contact situations, the deterioration of language in the neurologically impaired or elderly, or the death of whole languages. In this paper, language attrition refers to the loss of those second language skills primarily acquired in classroom situations. Suggestions for restoration techniques must be based upon knowledge of the (1) rate and order of attrition, (2) differential effects of loss on different language components, (3) types of skills that resist and are most vulnerable to decay, (4) relationship between method of instruction and/or order of presentation to long term retention of second language skills, (5) role of affective factors in language retention, (6) types of behavior that will best maintain skills once they have been acquired, and (7) role of individual differences in language skill loss. Necessary research must be based on predictor and criterion variables and on hypotheses based on regression theory, affective variables related to language learning and maintenance, and normative data of linguistic features controlled by proficient language users. (JK)

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The Problem of Language Skill Loss

Barbara F. Freed
University of Pennsylvania
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To most foreign language educators, language attrition has one simple but depressing meaning; the declining enrollment of students in foreign language courses. In general, when we speak of attrition, we refer to the statistics such as those recently presented by the President's Commission on Foreign Language and Area Studies. The Commission reported that "only 15% of American high school students now study a foreign language - down from 24% in 1965". (President's Commission, 1979). While such figures are indeed alarming, there is another sense in which language attrition is used which should be an even greater cause for concern. This is the loss of language skills by those who have previously studied a foreign language. Broadly defined, language attrition, or more specifically, language skill attrition, refers to the loss of any language or portion of a language. It may refer to the declining use of mother tongue skills by those in bilingual situations or among ethnic minorities, or to language contact situations where one language, for political or social reasons, comes to replace another. Language attrition also refers to the deterioration of language skills in neurologically impaired patients and to the decline of certain types of language usage by the elderly. Likewise, language attrition may refer to the death of whole languages, such as Latin and Greek in the past or East Sutherland Gaelic in Scotland, and various Indian dialects and languages in Mexico and South America today. For purposes of this discussion, the problem of language attrition will be limited to the loss of second language skills, primarily those acquired in a classroom setting.

In many respects, the loss of previously acquired second language skills may be a far more serious problem than that reported by the President's Commission. If we think of the investment in time, energy and funds that ha-

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gone into improving second language education and relate this to the rapid decline in the use of these acquired skills, we must be led to question the long term return on the investment. While we have been told to lament the fact that nearly one fifth of all American High Schools do not offer language courses, the fact is that four fifths of them do. (Brod, 1980, p. 20.) What is to become of the skills of these students upon graduation if "only 8% of all American colleges and universities now require a foreign language for admission" (President's Commission, 1979, p.6) and only somewhat more require language study for graduation. Subsequent to what many students consider "embondaged slavery" in their language classes, they give up foreign language study and allegedly lose all or part of what they have worked so hard to attain. To quote the Report of the MLA-ACLS Language Task Forces "one of the tragedies of the foreign language experience in American education is the speed with which painfully acquired skills are forgotten." (Brod, 1980, p.20). Precisely what is lost is not known. The only evidence comes from our own anecdotal experiences (you might pause for a moment to reflect upon what you think you remember of all the languages you have studied) and the all too common report from our students who tell us: "I studied French for two years in High School and all I remember is "Voilà M. Thibaut", or some other well practiced line from a first dialogue.

The problem is compounded by two facts: the first is that a student's decision to terminate language study is in many cases only temporary. Numerous students later decide, for career, pleasure or purely academic reasons, to resume study of a language learned in the past. Secondly, if recommendations and legislation proposed by the President's Commission are enacted, more students will again study foreign languages. If nothing is done to help them maintain their newly acquired skills, they too will join the ranks of those who once

studied and then dropped and forgot their language skills.

The problem thus is multifaceted and there are several basic questions to be posed. We must ask what can be done to delay the loss of language skills. How might languages be taught in the first place to postpone rapid erosion of these skills? Are there some methods that have been proven, beyond inflated claims, to guarantee retention over longer periods of time? We might further ask, how can language skills be most effectively restored once they are lost? Are there efficient approaches to what is alternatively called "revivification" or restoration of language skills? That is, how can students be helped to rebuild lost language skills? Must they be placed in so-called "refresher" courses where they are obliged to begin on page 1 of chapter 1 but, to do it all more quickly because it is, after all, a refresher course?

These are some of the practical questions to what have been termed "practical problems" (Thompson, 1980). But, the practical answers to such basic questions rest upon theoretical study. While the general problem of language attrition is not new, particularly in reference to first language loss, studies of the loss of second language skills are relatively recent and limited in number. Over the years there have been approximately 25 studies which have looked at various aspects of second language skill attrition (Williamson, 1980). Most of the studies have focused on vocabulary loss, a smaller number on grammar, reading, listening comprehension, writing and speaking. The majority of the studies examined the degree of loss which occurred following an exceedingly short interruption of study: 2-8 weeks and summer vacations. A few of the studies analyzed loss after an interruption of periods of 6 months to, at a maximum, two years. The languages studied have been German, Russian, Spanish, French and Japanese. The findings are limited, sometimes ambiguous and often contradictory.

Building upon the foundation of previous work, carefully planned and carefully controlled research must now be undertaken. Before any suggestions can be offered about such practical matters as efficient restoration techniques we need to know something about the rate of attrition, how quickly it sets in, what the sequence of skill loss is, if indeed there is a systematic sequence. We must ascertain if there are differential effects of loss on phonology, lexicon, morphology and syntax. We need to know if there are types of skills that resist decay and if there are other skills which are the most vulnerable. We must establish if there is any relationship between method of instruction and/or order of presentation to long term retention of second language skills. We also need to know what the role of affective factors is in language retention. Moreover, it is important to determine if erosion is less pronounced when proficiency is greatest or if language skill loss proceeds in the same way and at the same pace no matter what level of proficiency is attained. We need to know what types of behavior, (watching foreign language films or television, listening to the radio, engaging in spontaneous conversation with native speakers, or traveling at regular intervals, to the country where the language is spoken) will best maintain skills once they have been acquired. And, of crucial importance is the need to determine the role of individual differences in language skill loss.

To provide answers to such a diverse range of questions, long term, carefully designed research must be initiated.[1] Any such study must take into account variables of the individual and variables of the language in question. Furthermore, the research should be based on hypotheses generated by previous work in language acquisition and language loss. In what follows I will outline the two major variables to be considered and a series of hypotheses regarding the process of language skill attrition.

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[1] For a discussion of research design and testing alternatives the reader is referred to Oxford, 1980.

As in all such research an independent and dependent variable must be identified and considered. Following current social science research terminology they will be labeled respectively the "predictor variable" and the "criterion variable" (Lambert, 1980). The "predictor variable" encompasses those things an individual brings to the language learning - or in this case - the language forgetting situation. These would include the student's age, age when language study began and when study terminated. In considering the predictor variable we would want to know something about the student's mother tongue as well as all other language learning experiences. We would also consider facts of the study situation: the method, the emphases of various courses, and, to the extent possible, the order of input. Moreover, we should consider the level of proficiency attained with as much specificity as possible. Motivational factors would also be of interest: why students started to study the language in the first place and why they abandoned such study. It is important to consider how the language was used during and subsequent to formal study. As always the variables of socioeconomic class, sex, handedness, language aptitude and I.Q. must be included.

By contrast, the criterion variable refers to the actual linguistic features of the language being analyzed. On the most global level these would include the traditional linguistic categories of phonology, syntax, morphology and lexicon. These can be viewed through the skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Within each of these categories we will have to specify discrete features to investigate. Appropriate tests to measure each of these features will also have to be developed. We also want to be sure to include measures of overall functional ability (or proficiency) and stylistic range.

Beyond these variables initial research on second language skill loss should be based on any one of a number of hypotheses about the ultimate fate of

unused linguistic skills. Many such hypotheses emanate from previous work in the areas of psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics. These hypotheses fall into three general categories:

1. hypotheses based on regression theory: that is, a view of language loss as an unfolding or unraveling in reverse order of previously acquired forms.
2. hypotheses based on affective variables related to language learning and language maintenance.
3. hypotheses based on normative data of linguistic features controlled by proficient users of a language.

It should be noted that in all three cases, hypotheses about language skill loss derive from a framework which views language attrition as only one point on a continuum which includes language acquisition, language maintenance and language use (Andersen, 1980). Language loss or sequences of loss cannot be meaningfully measured without knowing in very specific terms something about the linguistic competencies or proficiencies which existed prior to atrophy.

I would like to consider each of the three categories of hypotheses in somewhat greater detail since they will ultimately provide the basis of all future research.

Regression Theory Hypotheses - Hypotheses based on regression theory were formulated to measure linguistic dissolution in brain damaged patients. They suggest that language deterioration may be compared, to borrow a metaphore, to a film shown in reverse (Caramazza and Zurif, 1978, p.100). Such hypotheses appear in the following alternate versions:

1) what is learned last will be lost first. In other words, the most recently acquired skills will be the most vulnerable (Berko-Gleason, 1978, p.109; 1980, p.7; Goodglass, 1980, p.101).

> For example, we all know as language teachers that the subjunctive and passive voice are taught toward the end of most beginning and intermediate language courses. We also know that students we encounter years later will have less control of these forms than of some others. This may be a consequence of the "last learned first lost" version of the regression theory.

Another version of the regression theory suggests that

> 2) what is first learned is last lost - that is, loss is in reverse order to acquisition (Berko-Gleason, 1978, p.110; 1980, p.8; Caramazza and Zurif, 1978, p.145). Does this account for long term retention of "Voici la plume de ma tante".... or any other first learned dialogue line?

A third variation on the regression theme is

> 3) that which is best learned, whether early or late in the acquisitional history will be last lost (Berko-Gleason, 1980, p.8).

A final version of the regression theory is

> 4) that which is most frequently used will be the most resistant to loss (Jill de Villiers, 1978, p.135).

It is important to emphasize that these variations of the regression theory have been proposed to account for the disruption of first language skills in aphasics. The findings in this respect are incomplete and often controversial (Berko-Gleason, 1978, 1980, p.9). However, they do provide workable hypotheses for measuring second language skill loss in healthy individuals.

Affective Variable Hypotheses - The second set of hypotheses, those based on affective variables derive primarily from the well known early work of Gardner and Lambert (1959)[2] on integrative and instrumental motivation in second language learning. Gardner has used these findings on social factors in language learning to develop a series of hypotheses related to second language skill retention or conversely to second language skill loss (Gardner, 1980). He suggests that

1) to the extent that attitudinal/motivational characteristics have been proven to be related to the level of second language proficiency, they will also relate to second language retention.
2) to the extent that attitudinal/motivational characteristics are related to indices of participation in languate related situations, they will relate to attempts to maintain second language skills once training has terminated.

To date, there has been almost no research on the influence of social factors on language loss per se. Yet, these hypotheses, just as those related to language loss among the neurologically impaired, can be easily applied to language attrition research.

Linguistic Feature Hypotheses - The final group of hypotheses meticulously detailed by Roger Andersen in his paper "Determining the Linguistic Attributes of Language Attrition" (1980) predict the fate of discrete linguistic features in the categories of morphology, syntax, phonology and lexicon. The hypotheses are stated in such a way that the skills of an individual losing his or her language are compared with those of a fully competent speaker. In summary,

[2]In planning language attrition research, attention might be given to the somewhat conflicting findings of Oller and Perkins, 1978 and Oller, etal, 1977.

Andersen's four major hypotheses are

1) that an individual who has lost or is losing skills in a second language will have a smaller and less varied lexicon consisting of high frequency items than would a fully competent speaker (Anderson, 1980, p. 6).

2) that an individual who has lost or is losing skills in a second language will exhibit a smaller number of phonological distinctions and that those distinctions which carry a high functional load will be maintained longer than those with a low functional load (Andersen, 1980, p. 17).

3) that an individual who has lost or is losing skills in a second language will exhibit a smaller number of morphologically marked categories. The degree of reduction or maintenance will correlate significantly with the relative frequency of use of these morphologically marked distinctions. Moreover, those categories which are also marked in the individual's stronger language will be more resistant to loss (Andersen, 1980, p.20).

and, finally

4) that an individual who has lost or is losing skills in a second language will use a smaller number of syntactic devices and will "preserve and overuse syntactic constructions that more transparently reflect the underlying semantic and syntactic relations." (Andersen, 1980, pp.22-23).

Beyond these hypotheses on linguistic form are a series of hypotheses that relate to other consequences of linguistic erosion. For example, there should be greater amounts of paraphrasing and circumlocution, slower speech, a more

limited range of styles and avoidance of certain topics.

In each of the above three categories, the suggested hypotheses may be mitigated by a large number of individual differences. These include the predictor variables mentioned earlier as well as metalinguistic awareness (Gleitman and Gleitman, 1970; Berko-Gleason, 1980) and different learner styles (Berko-Gleason, 1980; Fillmore, Kempler, Wang, 1979).

Given these hypotheses, the next step is to test them in a large number of separate but coordinated studies. No reliable suggestions for aiding retention, delaying loss, or restoring skills after loss can be offered until a significant amount of data has been collected and analyzed.

At this stage we can say with certainty that language attrition is a genuine phenomenon and a genuine problem - yours, mine and our students. We know relatively little about the degree of loss, the sequence of loss or the rate of loss. However, having identified the problem and outlined several possible areas to investigate we can anticipate large scale future research to provide some of the answers. There is good reason to believe that the effort will be well worth the investment since we can expect to learn something about how to preserve the hard earned skills of our second language students and presumably something about how to best maintain the first language skills of our ethnic minorities who in subtractive bilingual situations risk losing their first languages. In the process we cannot fail to learn something about today's banner words, proficiency skills and proficiency testing, and we will most certainly learn something more about second language acquisition.

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